DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 849 FL 024 530

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TITLE Official English and English Plus: An Update. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-FL-97-07
PUB DATE May 97
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT RR93002010
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CLL, 1118 22nd Street N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; Civil Rights; Cultural Pluralism; *English; English (Second Language); Federal Legislation; Immigrants; Limited English Speaking; Non English Speaking; *Official Languages; State Legislation; *Voting
IDENTIFIERS *English Plus Movement; ERIC Digests; *Official English

ABSTRACT

This digest provides an overview of the opposing sides in the Official English debate--Official English and English Plus. Proponents of Official English seek to make English the official language of the United States through passage of a constitutional amendment. The movement is spearheaded by two groups, U.S. English and English First. Official English supporters are concerned that bilingual ballots are contradictory to citizenship laws and make non-English speakers prey to bloc voting. They believe that bilingual education advocates preservation of native language and cultures at the expense of learning English. Although the Senate convened hearings on official English in 1984, and the House did in 1988, an English language amendment has never come to a congressional vote. In 1991, proponents took a different approach and launched a statutory form of official English. This Language of Government bill has appeared in several versions, and one of these bills passed the House but not the Senate in 1996. A similar bill is pending in the 105th Congress. English Plus supporters see cultural diversity as a national strength, support bilingual ballots, and cite evidence that successful bilingual education programs result in faster acquisition of English. English Plus legislation in the form of non-binding/policy statement has been introduced in opposition to English only legislation, and several states have adopted English Plus resolutions. A 13-item bibliography is provided. (JL)

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ED 406 849

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Digest

May 1997

(EDO-FL-97-07)

Official English and English Plus: An Update

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At the time of Independence, America was populated by speakers of many languages, including English, German, French, Spanish, and hundreds of American Indian languages. When the founding fathers decided not to declare an official language, their reasons included "a belief in tolerance for linguistic diversity within the population, the economic and social value of foreign language knowledge and citizenry, and a desire not to restrict the linguistic and cultural freedom of those living in the new country" (Judd, 1987, p. 15). The issue of an official language has surfaced periodically throughout U.S. history but was not raised in Congress until 1981, when Senator S.I. Hayakawa of California introduced a constitutional amendment to make English the official language. On the surface, the idea appeared to be a symbolic gesture—to give English, the *de facto* language of the country, official status. However, the proposed amendment also called for prohibition of state laws, ordinances, orders, programs, and policies that require the use of other languages. Neither the Federal government nor any state government could require any program, policy, or document that would use a language other than English.

Concern over the implications such an amendment could have for U.S. citizens and residents whose native language is other than English led to formation of an *English Plus* language advocacy coalition of more than 50 civil rights and educational organizations. In 1987, the coalition established the English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC). EPIC's purpose is to fulfill the need for centralized information on language rights and language policy, to respond to efforts to restrict the use of languages other than English, and to promote an alternative to Official English.

What Is Official English?

The Official English movement seeks to make English the official language of the United States through passage of a constitutional amendment. Supporters argue that "in a pluralistic nation such as ours, government should foster the similarities that unite us, rather than the differences that separate us" (Wright, 1992, p. 129) and "unless we become serious about protecting our heritage as a unilingual society—bound by a common language—we may lose a precious resource that has helped us forge a national character and identity from so many diverse elements" (Chavez, 1987, p. 11). Providing education or services in other languages, it is feared, will give rise to ethnic separatism and the breakdown of national unity; the way to prevent this rift is to make English the official language.

The movement is spearheaded by two groups, English First and U.S. English. Goals of the movement are to encourage ratification of a constitutional amendment making English the official language of the United States; to repeal bilingual voting requirements; to reduce funding for bilingual education; to enforce English language and civics requirements for naturalization; and to expand opportunities for learning English (U.S. English, 1992).

What Is English Plus?

English Plus is based on the belief that all U.S. residents should have the opportunity to become proficient in English PLUS one or more other languages. For nonnative speakers of English, this means the opportunity to acquire proficiency in English as well as maintain proficiency in their native language. For native English speakers, this means the chance to become proficient in a language other than English, while continuing to develop English proficiency.

Proponents of English Plus view cultural diversity as a national strength and believe that it provides the United States with a "unique reservoir of understanding and talent" (EPIC, 1992, p.152). They support access to bilingual services and education to provide a bridge for language minority individuals who are not yet proficient in English. They point to evidence that suggests immigrant groups are, in fact, very motivated to learn English. Such evidence includes results of a survey of 2,817 Americans of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban descent, which showed that more than 90% of the respondents believe U.S. citizens and residents should learn English (Duke, 1992). English Plus proponents see lack of opportunity, not lack of motivation, as the primary barrier to acquiring English. In their view, this is confirmed by the thousands of prospective ESL students who are regularly turned away because there are not enough classes to accommodate them.

English Plus supports legislative measures designed to provide linguistic assistance to Americans who are not fluent in English, including interpreter services in emergency situations such as 911; multilingual medical services; bilingual education and employment training; and multilingual drivers license exams. On the federal level, these include the bilingual provisions of the Voting Rights Act and the Court Interpreters Act. State provisions may also call for language services in civil courts and at migrant health and substance abuse centers. "National unity and our constitutional values require that language assistance be made available in order to ensure equal access to essential services, education, the electoral process, and other rights and opportunities guaranteed to all members of society" (EPIC, 1992, p. 151).

English Plus supporters agree with official English proponents that proficiency in English is indispensable and that opportunities must be provided for all U.S. residents to learn English. They do not believe a constitutional amendment will accomplish these goals, and they argue that official English laws are counterproductive because they restrict the rights and access to essential services of individuals who are not yet English-proficient.

Bilingual Ballots

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 eliminated literacy requirements for voting because they were seen as discriminatory against Blacks in the South. In 1975, to eliminate discrimination based on language proficiency, the House and Senate Judiciary Committees added the provision of election materials in languages other than

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English in jurisdictions where at least 5% of the population is American Indian, Asian American, Native Alaskan, or of Spanish heritage. English Plus advocates maintain that "the right to vote is fundamental because it provides a means to preserve all other rights" (Trasviña, 1992, p. 263). Voting materials are written at levels as high as college English; only about a third grade level of English literacy is needed to pass the literacy test for naturalization. Many native born Americans, such as some American Indians and Hispanics in the Southwest, especially the elderly who were taught little English in school, may be unable to cast an informed vote in English.

Official English proponents argue that people cannot cast an informed vote without knowing English, and that allowing non-English speakers to vote may make them prey to bloc voting by special interest groups. They argue that bilingual ballots are contradictory to citizenship laws, which require fluency in English, and inhibit the learning of English (Bikales, 1986).

Bilingual Education

Bilingual education programs use both the student's native language and English for instruction. In support of these programs, English Plus advocates cite research that emphasizes the positive influence native language development has on second language proficiency. Lack of first language development has been shown, in some cases, to inhibit the level of second language proficiency and cognitive academic development (Hakuta, 1990).

Krashen (1992) suggests that successful bilingual education programs actually result in faster acquisition of English. Content matter taught in the native language can be transferred to the second language. In the regular classroom, confronted with both concepts and language that are not comprehensible to them, limited English speakers learn neither the content nor the language. Research indicates that language acquisition occurs only when incoming messages can be understood (Krashen, 1992).

Official English proponents believe that bilingual education programs advocate maintenance of native languages and cultures at the expense of English, and that they encourage children not to learn English or become part of American society. They suggest that by teaching students English as quickly as possible, schools "make it clear to immigrant parents and children alike that mastery of English is indispensable for one's becoming a full member of American society" (English Language Amendment, 1984).

Official English and English Plus Legislation

Although the Senate convened hearings on Official English in 1984 and the House did so in 1988, the English Language Amendment has never come to a Congressional vote. In 1991, Official English advocates took a different approach and launched a statutory form of Official English. Such legislation would apply to the federal government alone and would require only a simple majority vote in Congress, in addition to the President's signature. This Language of Government bill has appeared in several versions, and one of these bills, H.R. 123, passed the House of Representatives in 1996. However, the companion measure never came to a vote in the Senate, and the bill died in the 104th Congress (Crawford, 1997b). A similar bill, also designated H.R. 123, is pending in the 105th Congress. If enacted, English would be designated the official language of the United States government, and the use of other languages in all federal government programs, publications, proceedings, and services would be outlawed—with a few exceptions for national security, language teaching, and the use of Native American languages (Crawford, 1997a). In opposition to English Only measures, English Plus legislation has been introduced in the form of a nonbinding policy statement.

At the state level, Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, and Nebraska have constitutional amendments designating English as the official state language. In addition, in March 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court vacated the decision by Arizona state and appellate courts that had ruled Arizona's 1988 English language amendment unconstitutional. However, provisions of the amendment cannot be enforced until another case, *Ruiz vs. Symington*, is resolved. States with official English statutes include Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wyoming. Bills are pending in 13 states, including Connecticut, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. Hawaii has passed an amendment declaring both English and Hawaiian official languages.

The English Plus movement has provided a means for advancing policies that support linguistic pluralism at the state level. For example, New Mexico has adopted a resolution declaring that proficiency in more than one language is beneficial to the nation, that English needs no official legislation to support it, and that proficiency in other languages should be encouraged. Oregon and Washington have also passed English Plus resolutions.

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Updates on the official English debate can be found at http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD.

This report was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002010. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.